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ABSTRACT

As a by-product of a study concerning how university level writers develop new genres of discourse, a study was undertaken to examine what factors or dimensions affect the composing process of university writers. Six undergraduate students at Carleton University in Ottawa participated, making available to researchers information about how they organized information in general, how they organized information from their classes, and how they went about writing papers for law classes as opposed to other classes. Data were gathered from papers the students had written, notes they had taken, and one to two hour personal interviews each week. Results suggested that students varied widely in their approach to digesting information and producing written work, from holding long open ended conversations with one another, to "brooding" about the material alone before writing about it. Students ranged from those who were largely structure oriented but tended to produce simplistic, inadequate papers, and those who were less structured, more "texture" oriented, and who tended to use writing conversation heuristically, but had difficulty producing written work and became frequently blocked in their writing. (JC)

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Dimensions of the Composing Process: Paper Delivered at CCCC, Atlanta, 1987

What I would like to discuss today is a set of what we have called "dimensions" or factors affecting the composing processes of university level students. We took the term from Janet Emig's The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (1971). Under that rubric, she lists a variety of factors, both extrinsic and intrinsic, which have potential for affecting the composing process. We uncovered these factors in the course of a research study that was aimed primarily at understanding how students go about acquiring new genres of discourse at the university level. In the course of that research, we uncovered both a universal underlying pattern as well as individual variations on this pattern. The dimensions that I will describe in the paper today are some of the factors which account for the differences in the composing processes of university level students.

But first, I should give you some background. Over the past few years my colleagues and I have been undertaking some research one of whose by-products has involved this insight into factors affecting the composing process. Let me describe this research for you, and let me say as well that the project has been funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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Our primary question has been the following. How do students acquire a new genre of academic discourse?

Specifically, we focused on a group of university undergraduates who were all taking an introductory undergraduate Law course. Through analysing the papers they wrote for Law and comparing these to the papers they were writing for other disciplines, it became apparent that indeed the Law writing was idiosyncratic, and could be differentiated along a variety of discourse dimensions, syntactic, rhetorical, etc.

Our goal, as I have said, was to understand how these students acquired this new genre of discourse, and in order to do so, we did the following. First, we selected one seminar group of 20 students from the class of 200. We taped all the lectures and we observed all the seminars. Then we selected six students from the seminar group for close study. First, we collected all their writing of the year--class notes, study notes, notes and drafts of all papers. (There were four such papers assigned over the year, four 800 word papers.) Second, we asked these students to keep logs of all their Law related activities: studying, writing, reading discussing Law with friends, thinking in the shower, etc. Third, most important, we interviewed these students at least once a week, for one to two hours each time over the entire academic year, September to April. The interviews began with the logs but were deliberately open-ended.

The students were paid volunteers who were told that we were interested in understanding how students learned a new discipline. (We deliberately underplayed what was our primary focus--the writing.) The students who volunteered turned out to

represent the range of grades in the course, although neither the very highest nor the lowest students were included. They seemed to us to be, in age, interest, and ability, typical Carleton students.

To give you a better sense of what typical at Carleton means, I should say, for those who don't know, that Carleton is a university in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. The participation rate in universities in Ontario is under 15%. That means that of the university-age population, 15% go to university. These are, of course, not necessarily the top 15% in ability, since there are a variety of external factors at play--urban vs. rural, for example, and ethnic; but on the whole, we have students at the upper end of the spectrum.

Students enter university after five years of high school, and so students tend to be more mature than the average American freshman. The students we observed ranged in age from 19 - 21.

One more comment about our method. As you can see, on the one hand, our research design involved textual analyses: we looked at all the essays written by the students as well as drafts, notes, and analyses of the reading and lectures. In addition, we performed extensive observations and, in fact, tended to think of our study as quasi-ethnographic, in that we attempted to enter the world of the students—in that we observed a self-contained system as naturalistically as possible, attempting to understand the rules that operated within this system, and in that we imposed no experimental intervention, except of course our presence as observers.

Further, we tended to use the typical safeguards of ethnographic research. Rather than using the conventional procedures of experimental research to guarantee reliability and validity (except in our textual analyses), we used cross-checking and triangulation in order to ensure reliability. Specifically, we had multiple observers who cross-checked their observations (we met as a team for weekly meetings); we checked insights derived from observations and conversations against those derived from the analyses of texts and drafts; and we checked many of the insights we developed about the students' processes at the end of the project against the retrospective analyses by the students themselves. That is, throughout the year, we simply probed and listened to the students' accounts of their behaviours and processes. At the end of the year, we suggested to the students the patterns we were seeing and included the informants' responses as part of our cross-checking procedure.

Our primary goal, as I have said, was to understand how students acquire a new and distinctive genre of academic discourse. The results of that part of our analysis have been reported elsewhere. In the course of our research, however, we were able to observe a lot more than what we had thought of as our primary focus. (Those of you who have been involved in naturalistic observational research will appreciate how much raw data is unearthed this way.) And one of the things we were able to articulate, as a result of this research, was a set of what we have called dimensions affecting the composing process.

These dimensions include a range of external and internal variables such as cultural linguistic patterns, reading

behaviours, etc. However, what I would like to focus on today is a subset of such dimensions, which we have called "stances." (In fact, I will only have the time to deal with a subset of that subset.) By stances, we mean the positions taken typically by students in dealing with their experiences.

We use the term "stance" deliberately--consciously avoiding the use of such more familiar terms as "style" or "type" because we want to avoid the notions of fixedness, of inflexible set implied by such terms. We have found that the realities we are observing are more subtle and shifting.

Let me stress too that these notions, these stances, are "ethnographic concepts" in the sense described by Goetz and LeCompte (1984). That is, we are not talking about the operationally definable concepts of experimental research. These notions are a) empirically based and b) phenomenological in nature.

I have two more caveats. The first relates to my insistence on the flexibility, the potential for shift involved in the notion of stance. We categorized our students' stances in terms of their actual performance, not in terms of their potential. We don't know what they could do; we have strong reason to believe that, in many cases, they might behave in different ways, given different pedagogic circumstances. We can only describe how they have responded typically in the past.

The second caveat is related. We recognized the possibility that students may take a different stance with respect to a certain dimension, depending on the sphere of operation. This is

DIMENSIONS OF THE COMPOSING PROCESS

Stances	Variation Observed According to Sphere*
Use of Language as a Heuristic	✓
Structure vs. Texture Orientation	
Concrete vs. Abstract Orientation	✓
Critical Thinking	
Spectator vs. Participant	
Meta-awareness	
"Knowledge-telling" vs. "Knowledge-transforming	✓
Self-Defining	

*The spheres distinguished for this study are the following: everyday experience; academic discourse; writing for law; other academic writing.

not a new idea. Vygotsky (1962) made the same kind of point when he pointed to how adolescents could operate at the "concept" stage in certain spheres, specifically school learning, and still function at the "complex" stage in terms of every day experience. Although we are not talking about stages of development, we recognize the same potential for variation in our categories and for that reason we specify as well spheres of operation. The spheres we distinguished were the following: everyday experience; public discourse; academic writing; Law writing.

Use of Language as a Heuristic

The first stance that I would like to discuss today relates to the way students typically use language productively, that is, in writing and especially talk. For this dimension, we perceived a continuum with students like Elinor and Robin at one end and Janet at the other. Elinor and Robin typically used talk heuristically, as a way of exploring or discovering. At the other end was Janet who never seemed to use language in this way at all.

Elinor and Robin frequently reported on conversations with friends and family in which they explored their inner lives, their personal experiences, as well as the subjects they were studying, typically in fact pointing to connections among all these. They enjoyed playing with ideas, pushing them to their limits and beyond, trying different tacks and evoking the mutually supportive exploratory environment that Britton describes in Language and Learning (1970) and "Talking to Learn" (Barnes 1969). Their interviews proved to be examples and

Use of Language as Heuristic

	Every day Experience	Academic Experience	Composing
Janet			
Elinor	✓	✓	
Robin	✓	✓	✓

corroborations of such patterns. Both girls typically launched into extended exploratory monologues and needed only the interviewers' initial prompts, if that, and encouraging "go ons."

Janet represented the other extreme. She never reported on rap sessions with friends or family. More significantly, her interviews themselves were radically different in shape and structure from those of Elinor and Robin. It is important to stress that Janet was not shy, introverted or retiring. On the contrary, she was very outgoing, not at all shy, and not at all reticent about discussing her personal life. Yet the rhythm of her interviews was radically different from those of Robin and Elinor. While Robin and Elinor launched into their long exploratory monologues, Janet simply answered the questions posed to her. Her conversational turns were always short: she responded directly to any questions asked but went no further. Once, as a test, the interviewer sat silent, waiting, for a few moments. Janet sat silent as well, uncomfortable but silent. Without a direct question, she had nothing to say.

The same pattern seemed to hold true for these students with respect to talk about the course material. Both Robin and Elinor reported on discussions with friends about the course material where they argued, extended, pushed ideas to the limits. Janet did none of this. That is, she sometimes discussed her course work when an exam or assignment deadline was imminent, but her purpose for doing so was radically different. She talked to other students to discover what information they had: her term was "facts." She saw conversational interactions as barter

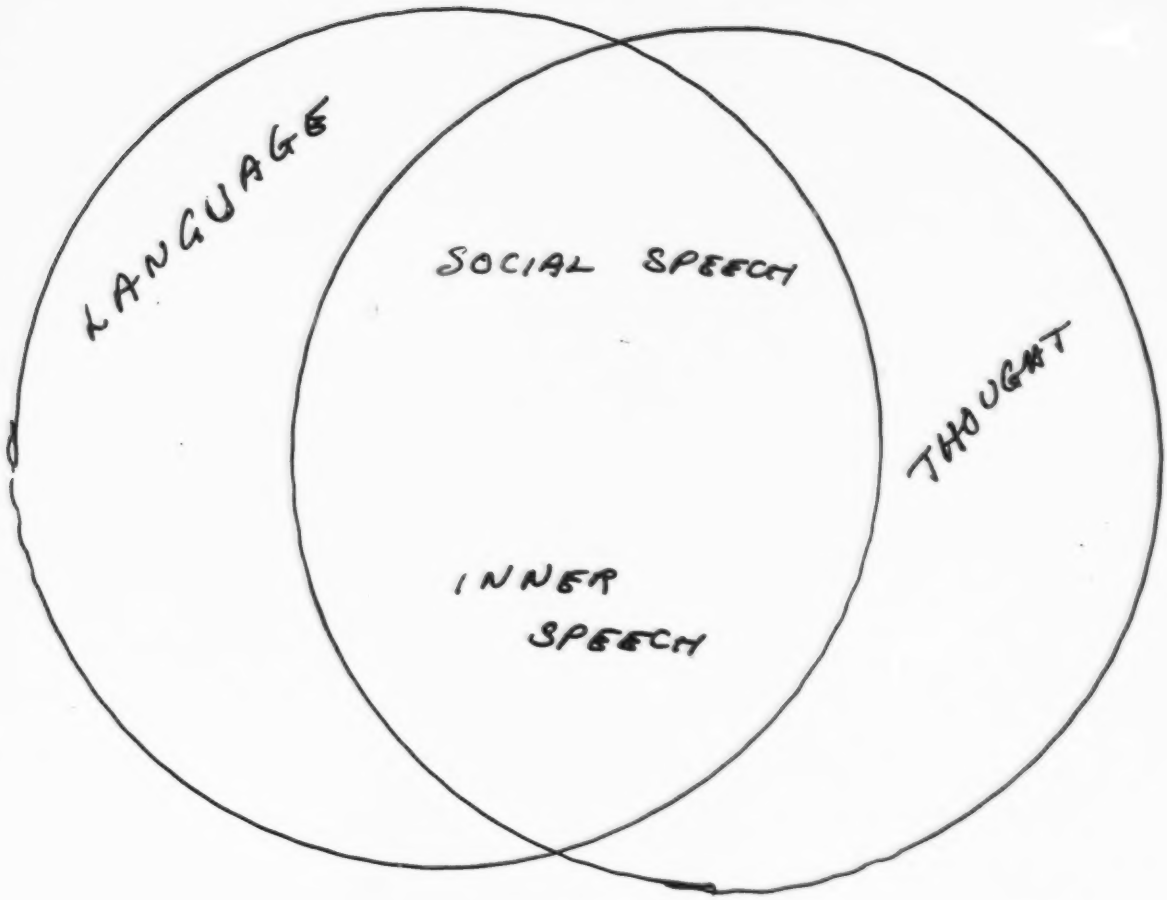
situations: "I will give you the facts I have garnered in exchange for your set of facts." Further, Janet was most concerned to distinguish "facts" from "opinion." She was not interested in other students' opinion. Conversations were only valuable if her partner could be relied on to give her accurate facts: she spent a lot of time worrying about whose facts could be trusted.

Now the thing I want to emphasize, having presented this continuum, is the following. All this does not mean that Robin and Elinor were super-students and that Janet was disabled. On the contrary. Janet was a strong student and in the Law course, her performance, as measured by grades, was usually the highest in our group of six.

The point is that her learning and discovering seemed to take place at a level below that of conscious articulation. If to use Britton's terms, talk is "the exposed edge of thought," Janet typically exposes less of her thought.

What we don't know is whether Janet discovered and learned through what Vygotsky called inner speech and solitary brooding or whether her insights were derived at a preverbal level. Let me use Vygotsky's diagram of the intersecting circles of language and thought to make my point.

Vygotsky talks about two intersecting circles, each representing two independent and intersecting functions, thinking and language use. When these circles overlap, the two functions intersect and interact, and where they do, we have both social (i.e. outer) and inner speech (the language that goes on in one's head.) It may be that Janet's discoveries came about through


LANGUAGE
SOCIAL SPEECH
THOUGHT
INNER SPEECH

silent inner speech (a function that is radically distinct from social speech) or that her insights were derived at the non-verbal or preverbal thinking level. Whichever it is, the point is that she did arrive at insights and that she did so without the use of talk as a heuristic. It is essential that those of us who are committed to active uses of language as modes of knowing --and I would guess that all of us in this room fall into that category --recognize that there are other ways, that other stances are possible.

Having articulated these stances with respect to experience in general, it is useful to observe our students' stances re. the use of language as a heuristic with respect to composing. And here, an interesting difference emerges. It is only Robin who regularly and deliberately uses language as a way of discovering in her composing. The question arises: why didn't Elinor use talk as a way of discovering in her composing as she did in helping her sort out her understanding of life and the world. The answer seems to be quite simply that Elinor had never been shown that talk could be used as a strategy to generate and clarify ideas during composing (and Elinor did not have sufficient meta-awareness to realize what she was doing on the few occasions that she lucked into this procedure.)

The point is that Elinor, like most of the students in this study, carried with her a very limited and inadequate model of the composing process: for her, what creativity theory calls the preparatory stage consisted only of research (i.e. reading) and solitary brooding. If sometimes this was accompanied by talk,

this occurred entirely by chance and was not recognized as a useful strategy.

Observation of her behaviour and performance over the year, however, revealed that, for the papers where she did talk to friends during the initial exploratory period, the composing process was smoother--that is, she felt less anxiety, the writing was not blocked and she easily arrived at the "click" she needed in order to begin; furthermore, the products were superior--that is, received higher grades.

When this insight about her performance was suggested to Elinor by one of the researchers, in a retrospective interview at the end of the study, her face lit up. She immediately saw the pattern: when she had friends in a course and talked through the ideas, the paper "clicked" for her; when she did not, she became blocked and the products did not satisfy her. She then recounted an incident when she went to apologize to a professor for the lateness of her paper, explaining that she had begun her research on time but had become inexplicably blocked. "And then, as I was explaining the problem I was having with the material to her, I suddenly saw the solution." Elinor left the session with us tremendously excited by her discovery of her own processes and of the power that she felt this tool would give her.

The point is that because Elinor so typically used talk as a heuristic in other spheres, the transfer to writing was easy and powerful. For someone like Janet, however, such a strategy was not available or at least not very easily available. Nor was it clearly desirable.

One final point. I have been focusing on the use of talk as a heuristic. The question arises as to the other productive use of language--writing. None of these students consciously used writing as a way of discovering or exploring or learning. They didn't free write as part of their preparation, nor did they consider their first drafts as tentative or heuristic.

In point of fact, Elinor's drafts and retrospective interviews suggest that she did discover in the course of writing. Elinor, however, was not aware of this phenomenon and never consciously used writing as an epistemic tool. Analyses of Janet's writing, in contrast, suggest that writing never functioned epistemically for her. As she described the process, she always thought out her ideas in her head--AND THEN SAID THEM ALOUD--before putting pen to paper. The writing recorded what she had already discovered. For Janet, neither talk, nor writing served heuristic ends.

Without belaboring the point, I want to insist that Janet was able to learn, to discover and to create successfully without the use of talk or writing as heuristic. What we observed were distinctly different stances, different patterns with respect to the use of language as a heuristic among the six students we observed, and all these students succeeded with these very different stances at the different tasks.

Structure vs. Texture

Another difference we observed related to our students' stances toward, or preferences for structure vs. texture in their

experiences. The terms are taken from John Crowe Ransom's (1938) theory of literature. Structure refers to the underlying pattern, the form, the controlling idea, of a work of art; texture refers to the particulars, the concrete data which are both organized by the structure and overflow its bounds. There is always, for Ransom, a sense of the resistance of some of the particulars and data to the structure, an overabundance, an overflow and even a sense of irrelevance to the underlying plan.

Such a model for literature has its counterpart in everyday life as the theories of George Kelly (1963) and Jean Piaget (1954) concerning human learning suggest. As functioning human beings, we all negotiate the tensions between structure and texture, developing new patterns to account for the data of our experience and responding to new data by accommodating our structures as well as assimilating the new experience.

Although this necessity to negotiate between structure and texture is universal, the students we observed could be differentiated by their primary focus. There are those whose eyes are open constantly to the new data and those whose primary focus is on the maps they have already developed; those who are sensitive to and responsive to the texture of their world and those who cling to the structures they have developed.

We can plot the stances of our students as different points on a continuum. At one extreme is Janet, whose focus is primarily on structure. She is uninterested in new data and clings always to earlier formulations. Her first response to any one situation is immediately to organize and categorize, to plan

out every detail of her life, to timetable her life, to schedule her days.

(Furthermore, a short while into the term, we discovered an interesting phenomenon. It was important for Diane to formulate a plan, to articulate a schedule for every aspect of her experience. However, observations of her actual behaviour revealed quite quickly that she did not in fact conform to this pattern. For example, although she gave us a very detailed description of her composing processes, her actual behaviour did not accord with this description at all. Now there's nothing unusual about this: we all make plans that we don't adhere to. The point is that Janet didn't know that she was doing this. She believed that she adhered to all her plans. She needed to hang on to her structures as a kind of talisman.)

In contrast, both Elinor and Mary Jane paid more attention to the texture of their lives. Elinor talked about being fascinated by the "cracks in an ice cube," and Mary Jane could describe in detail every gesture of the professor as he lectured. Both enjoyed, revelled in the particular, the detail.

Now let me stress that this is not the same as a distinction between concrete and abstract which is a separate stance that I will not go into today. That this is so became very clear when we realized that Elinor was strongly and consciously oriented to the abstract ("and I mean really abstract", she kept saying) while Mary Jane was oriented towards the concrete. Yet both favoured texture over structure. The point is that structures are possible at all levels of abstracting from the most concrete

Structure
Texture
Janet
Elinor
Mary Jane

Concrete
Abstract
Mary Jane
Janet
Elinor

to the most abstract: one can structure concrete particulars or abstract particulars. Both Mary Jane and Elinor took pleasure in the wayward particular and particular for its own sake.

With respect to this dimension the students' stances predicted a characteristic pattern in their composing process (and consequently the kind of pedagogic help they needed to compensate for characteristic weakness.) Both Elinor and Mary Jane frequently got lost in the particulars--the richness of the detail--of the material they researched as well as of the ideas they generated themselves during the composing. Elinor knew that she needed some help in seeing or creating some organizing framework. She explained that she needed to "find an angle," to "feel a click" which would allow her to see the overall pattern. Thus she felt liberated when her political science teaching assistant helped her to organize a flow chart for her data. In the same way, she felt exhilarated when she suddenly saw a life plan for herself, although she recognized that this plan was loose and provisional, that it would likely be modified, adapted, even changed. The point is that Elinor's very immersion in, and intense response to the concrete texture of her life meant that she had greater difficulty finding structure and concomitantly felt its lack intensely.

Janet, in contrast, found organizing patterns for her papers easily. Her characteristic weakness was that she resorted too early to the easy and obvious formula. When assigned composing tasks which implied finding a structure for a large mass of untidy detail (as in literature papers), she had difficulty. Because she was less prepared to remain fallow and open to the

data, because she had so little tolerance for mess and ambiguity, her papers tended to be simplistic, weak, and vapid, inadequate.

Self-Defining

One further dimension that I would like to focus on relates to notions developed by both Bereiter and Scardamalia (1983) as well as Csikzentmihalyi and Larson (1984).

In Being Adolescent, Csikzentmihalyi and Larson (1984) stress the importance of a match between the challenge of a task and the skills of the person who undertakes it. When the challenge is too great for the skills, the response is anxiety. When the skills exceed the challenge, the response is boredom--at least for most people. There are however, some, and these are the interesting ones, who, when confronted with a task that is not sufficiently challenging, are able to reinterpret the task at a higher, more complex, and consequently more challenging level. They turn boredom into useful reflection.

These are the students we call self-defining. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1983) put forward a similar notion, specifically with respect to writing. They distinguish two groups of students. Both must focus all their attention initially on the task of writing. The difference is that, once that task becomes more automated so that some attention is freed up, those on what Bereiter and Scardamalia call the high road behave differently from those on the low road. "On the high road, mental capacity is continually being channelled into changing the nature of the task."

We saw the same kind of pattern in operation in our study. Among the students we observed, two felt the course was not sufficiently challenging. Elinor complained of the simpleness of the ideas, and the texts, and she turned off. She remained bored throughout. (She complained that the lectures were pitched too low, in contrast to her political philosophy class.)

Robin, instead, took the high road. She redefined the task for herself. She was very conscious and explicit about doing so. She explained that she had discovered early on that she was not going to be given the intellectual stimulation that she anticipated from most of her university courses. And so, as she put it, she had to make her own challenges. The result was that she was fascinated by and challenged by her courses.

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